Exploring the Soul of Gullah Culture....

A Progress Report

Volume 1, Number 1 **National Park Service Gullah/Geechee Special Resource Study** **June 2001** **Page 1**

Former rice field, Caw Caw Interpretive Center

Rice sheaves bundled for drying
(Courtesy Charleston Museum)

Flailing (threshing) the rice
(Courtesy Charleston Museum)

Winnowing house near Georgetown, SC
(Courtesy Charleston Museum)

Sharon Murray shares stories of Gullah culture
(Courtesy CCRC, Caw Caw Interpretive Center)

Overview

NPS Special Resource Study Focuses on Gullah/Geechee Culture

Studying a living culture is quite an undertaking, but that's exactly what the National Park Service is doing. Because the Gullah culture is threatened, Congressman James E. Clyburn introduced the enabling legislation that led to the Congressional mandate for this 3-year project. The term *Gullah* is generally used in the South Carolina sea islands, while the word *Geechee* is more frequently used along the Georgia coast. For the purpose of this study, *Gullah* and *Geechee* are used interchangeably.

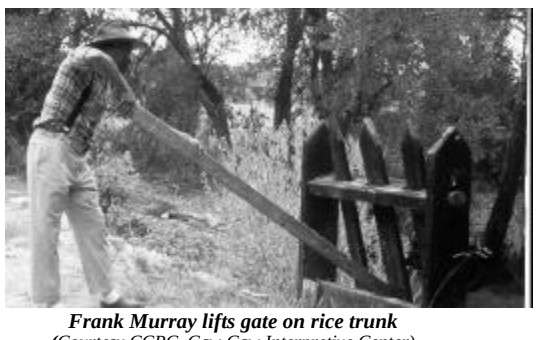
Special resource studies usually focus on one building or tract of land that is being considered for protection. Instead, the area included in this project crosses state lines as it stretches the Cape Fear River in North Carolina to the St. John' River in Florida, encompassing the sea islands and coastal plains of South Carolina and Georgia. As a result of this project, the National Park Service seeks to determine whether or not the agency will have a role in the preservation of the Gullah culture.

Gullah/Geechee people are a distinct group of African Americans who are descendants of enslaved Africans from the Rice Coast of West Africa. Because of their geographic isolation and strong sense of community, these Gullah people were able to develop a distinct creole language and preserve more of their African cultural tradition than any other black community in the United States. Many of these rural Gullah communities still exist, but they are threatened by encroaching development, lack of jobs, and diminishing population.

The isolation of these sea island communities was key to the survival of the Gullah culture. Within these rural communities, Gullah/Geechee people were able to maintain their language, arts, crafts, religious beliefs, rituals, and foods that are distinctly connected to their West African roots. Real estate development, changing job markets, and population shifts have forced many of these people to leave their traditional family lands. Along with these changes and loss of isolation comes the threat of losing this unique culture that has survived since colonial times.

During the spring and summer of 2000, the National Park Service held public meetings in Charleston, Georgetown, Savannah, St. Helena Island, St. Simons Island, and Jacksonville. The meetings were an open forum for residents of these areas, and gave NPS staff the opportunity to *listen* to the thoughts and concerns of the people. Many of those in attendance suggested that another meeting should be held near the NC line. Following that suggestion, an additional meeting was held at Little River, SC.

The community meetings were generally well-attended, and many people expressed their thoughts and suggestions. Transcripts of these meetings have been analyzed by a research team at the Avery Institute in Charleston to determine the frequency of various topics of discussion.



Frank Murray lifts gate on rice trunk
(*Courtesy CCRC, Caw Caw Interpretive Center)*

Sharon Murray and group perform traditional Gullah music
(Courtesy CCRC, Caw Caw Interpretive Center)

What was said at the meetings ?

Transcript Analysis Conducted at Avery Research Center

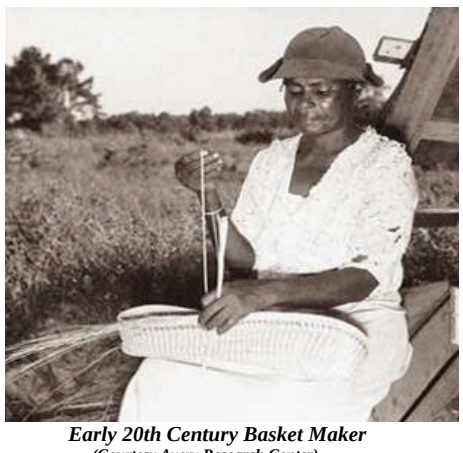
A dedicated group of students from the College of Charleston spent the week before Christmas analyzing the transcripts from the first round of Gullah town meetings. Dr. James K. Dias of the College of Charleston Department of Computer Science, and Alada Shinault-Smalls of the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, led the students through the process of reading the data to produce a listing of topics covered at the seven meetings. Dr. Dias further analyzed the data to determine the frequency of each subject.

Among the many issues discussed were:

- Educating young people to take pride in their unique cultural heritage
- Preserving historic sites within Gullah communities
- Creating job opportunities and economic development to keep people from leaving Gullah communities to find work
- Finding a way for the Gullah people to *tell their own story* and share in the financial gain
- Proliferation of gated resort communities in the coastal region. Such development has limited access to area creeks for fishing and crabbing, made cemeteries off limits to families of those buried there, and eliminated many areas where sweetgrass, palm, and longleaf pine were collected for making traditional baskets and crafts.

Many speakers expressed their concerns about the number of *outside* researchers who have come into Gullah communities to study or write about their culture. Frequently researchers have used this information for financial gain or to complete requirements for academic degrees. Most researchers have never reported their findings, requested editorial help, or sent copies of their publications to the people who helped them. As a result people in these communities feel exploited, have become distrustful of outsiders, and are unwilling to share information. If there is financial gain to be made from telling their story, the Gullah people believe they should share in those profits.

Some speakers discussed the importance of Gullah/Geechee cultural heritage, traditional foods, music, religion, language and the significance of these contributions to the shared heritage of all Low Country people. Others talked of Gullah artists, writers, musicians, and craftsmen who have made substantial contributions to the cultural fabric of America and have not yet received proper recognition. Still stated that the Gullah people are ready and willing to *tell their own story in their own words*.



Early 20th Century Basket Maker
(Courtesy Avery Research Center)

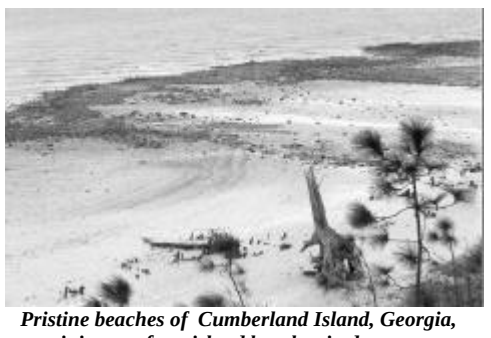
Early 21st Century basket maker, Vera Manigault
Sweetgrass basketry has remained virtually unchanged over the past several centuries

Gathering sweetgrass for traditional baskets

Vera Manigault cutting palm for sewing baskets

Interior View
1st African Baptist Church
Cumberland Island, GA

Sweeping the yard with handmade sedgebroom
(Photo by A Shinault-Smalls)



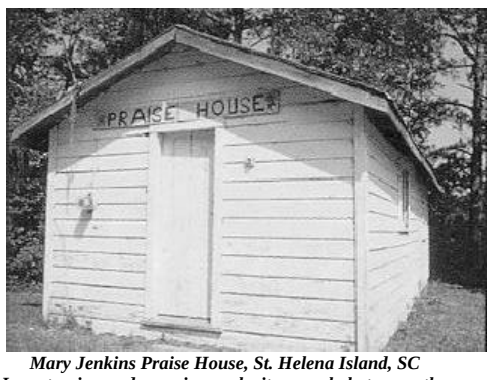
Pristine beaches of Cumberland Island, Georgia, reminiscent of sea island beaches in days past

What happens next?

National Park Service Set to Begin Phase II of Gullah Study

Beginning in June 2001, a team from the National Park Service, along with community volunteers, will once again visit Gullah/Geechee communities from North Carolina to Florida. Rather than hold large community meetings, the team will focus on closer interactions with small groups of people -- church groups, existing community groups, the lunch crowd at local restaurants, and small gatherings on front porches. This round of meetings will focus on listening and learning -- *listening* to the ideas and comments from the grassroots and *learning* about the buildings and other sites that are historically significant to each community.

A major goal of Phase II is identifying and mapping places that are significant to local African-American history and Gullah Culture. These sites may be old school houses, boat landings, praise houses, churches, cemeteries, slave cabins, community centers, even large shade trees where people traditionally gathered. The Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) system will be used to pinpoint these sites on grid maps. A small electronic device will plot the location along with a basic description of the site for later computer analysis. Finished maps will be made available to communities and agencies involved in historic preservation. Even more important than this high tech equipment are the *people who live in the communities along the way.* The people know the significant sites; the people know their own local history; the people know the stories told by their elders. These local people will be telling the story and identifying the sites. The people are the most important part of the process.



Mary Jenkins Praise House, St. Helena Island, SC
Inventorying and mapping such sites may help to save them.

Demolished praise house located on grounds of First African Baptist Church, Daufuskie Island, SC.

Why should I help?

Community Support Vital to Success of Gullah Project

More outsiders coming into the community wanting information! Why should I tell them anything? Why should I help? What's in it for me? These questions will be asked again and again over the next few months as the meeting and mapping process begins. **Why *should* you help?**

There are many reasons why this process is important to Gullah/Geechee communities. The inventory of historic sites will provide a record of what exists today, what existed in the past, and what exists in the oral tradition and collective memories of the elders. This information may be used to nominate sites for the National Historic Register, request the placement of historic markers, and provide records for future generations. A historic inventory may help communities safeguard against unwanted development by using laws that protect historic sites, cemeteries, and structures. Some of these locations may be fragile or sensitive places where tourists and others are unwelcome. Sensitive places will be mapped, but their locations will be marked as *unavailable* to the general public.

Historic locations identified in this inventory may become the basis for economic development through heritage tourism. The mapping system may be used to identify those places that are suitable for tourism promotion while protecting the sensitive sites from the public. When preservation issues arise, the areas will be already identified and known to the state preservation officials. With such documentation in hand, these agencies will be able to step in quickly to advise and assist communities in saving or protecting their historic properties. Communities which have identified their unique offerings may choose to associate themselves with heritage trails or corridors in their respective states. Heritage tourism brings millions of dollars into local economies each year and could mean an economic boost for the Gullah community.

There is yet another important reason to locate and map sites of historic and cultural importance to the Gullah/Geechee population. Historic sites of importance to the European settlers of the Low Country have been identified, mapped, and studied in great detail. African American sites have not been well documented, and many are already lost. This mapping project, if successful, will begin to create a more complete picture of the cultural history and development of the rice-growing regions and their populations in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

The unique cultural heritage of the Gullah/Geechee people has left a significant imprint on the history of America and made a substantial contribution to the cultural heritage of all Americans. Identifying and preserving this culture and its associated historic sites is key to *telling the whole story*.

For further information on the Gullah/Geechee Special Resource Study or to submit your comments, please contact
Cynthia H. Porcher, 1214 Middle St., Sullivan's Island, SC 29482 (843) 881-5516 Cynthia_Porcher@nps.gov
Michael A. Allen, 1214 Middle St., Sullivan's Island, SC 29482 (843) 881-5516 Michael_Allen@nps.gov

---

Gullah/Geechee Special Resource Study
Historic Charleston Foundation
National Park Service, Southeast Region
1924 Building, 100 Alabama St, SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Non Profit
Organization
US Postage
PAID
Charleston, SC
Permit 1374

Exploring the Soul of Gullah Culture.... A Progress Report